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For Estee Lauder's Thia Breen, a Successful Career Is Made up of 'People, Passion and Performance'

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In her keynote address at the 28th Annual Wharton Women in Business Conference in Philadelphia, Thia Breen, president of Estee Lauder Americas and head of Global Business Development, cited three factors that have elevated her to one of the most powerful positions in the American retail market: "people, passion and performance."

The theme of the event was "Business & Beyond: Forging Our Own Paths in Career and in Life." The daughter of a small-town druggist in Benson, Minn., Breen knows quite a bit about forging a career. "I guess I have always had 'retail' in my blood," she said. "I'm still selling cosmetics and my brother runs the drug store back home."

The turning point in her own career came relatively early, she noted. "That was the day I learned I was about to be fired, or, let me correct that -- almost fired."

As a young graduate of the University of Minnesota, Breen had gone to work for Marshall Fields, the retail chain, in Minnesota. Work was her only option then. "I had borrowed money off my grandfather to buy a car," she said, "and I was facing car payments, plus paying him back. I really needed a job." The only opening in the store was in the toy department. Breen took it. "It was a two-person department, me and the woman I worked for. I counted stock, I transferred stock and I ordered stock. It was hard work and very physical work. When the trucks came in, I 'received' the stock -- which is the same thing as unloading it."

Breen said she made the most of that opportunity. "After about six months, our department was the best-performing unit in the store, and I wanted some recognition. The woman I worked for never had much to say, so I talked to the manager and asked him about a promotion." But Breen was shot down. "'Nobody gets promoted out of that department,' he told me. 'The woman you work for just doesn't do promotions. Ever.'" That was bad enough, Breen said -- but then he added, "I think you're going to be fired, anyway."

Breen was stunned and asked him why, noting that the department's numbers had gone up. His response: "The women in the regional office just don't like you. The decision has been made."

The incident taught her a critical lesson. "That was the moment I started to understand: I am totally responsible for my own success.... Up until that point, I kept expecting -- believing -- that there would always be someone else there to [take charge of my career]. I also learned that it is entirely up to you, and you alone, to ask for what you need."

Shortly after that, as she was preparing to leave, the store manager asked Breen what she knew about cosmetics. "The answer was, 'Not much.' But I wasn't going to tell him that. So, instead, I said something like, 'I know I can learn everything I have to know in three months.'"

And that was the real beginning of Breen's career.

"There will be times when life seems unfair," she told her audience, "but navigating those times will be the most important thing you can do."

Bleeding Clinique Green

Continuing her career in cosmetics soon meant relocating to Los Angeles, Calif., as a Clinique account executive for The Estee Lauder Companies. "My blood was about to turn 'Clinique green,'" Breen noted. It was 1977, and she was immediately taken with her new assignment: organizing a sales team to begin selling the newly introduced Clinique cosmetics product line in a territory of 25 stores. "I saw all these women walking around in long white coats; they seemed to be so special and so apart from the rest of the stores. I really loved that idea."

She relished the challenge of putting together what she calls "the high-performance team." "If you can achieve that, you can achieve anything; that's the 'people' part of the formula," she said. "The rest follows from the team-building. The 'passion' for what you are doing has to be there, of course, and the team gives it an outlet. Put those together, and you can turn it into high 'performance.'"

This was where Breen also learned how to manage. In order to manage well, she noted, you must have a firm base of account knowledge and service skills. But her experience in the pharmacy and the department store, stocking toys, had already given her a formidable array of service skills.

"That's hardly where it ends, though," Breen said. "You develop the ability to manage by giving the people who work for you honest, direct feedback and letting them know what they're doing right and what needs improvement. That's the best thing you can do for them. How well you work with your people will make or break your career. And, if you are charged with developing a high-performance team, learning how to let someone go with dignity is a very important part of it. I became acutely aware of this because I hadn't been shown [such consideration] back in Minnesota. I was determined never to make another person go through that."

Through Breen's and her team's efforts, Clinique became the top performer for Estee Lauder in California. But a new launch was just around the corner: By 1985, Breen would get a promotion to national sales manager as a member of the founding team for Origins. "The Origins line was launched in department stores next to Clinique. It was aimed at the customer who had to be the first one on her block to have something new in the prestige beauty and 'repair' cosmetics line. The quality was certainly there. But, putting it right next to Clinique, which had become the number-one cosmetics product in American department stores, was not the way to do it."

Breen felt that the team had gotten away from its core focus, which she described as "what we do best -- helping customers get great skin through great products and great service." Clinique and Origins were fighting each other. "That kind of competition can be great for business and energizing," Breen said, "but what we figured out was that to succeed, Origins also had to have that 'store-within-a-store' concept that had worked so well for Clinique. It needed a completely new business model. It couldn't be sitting there next to Clinique. That's the fascination of retail." The ideal business model, it turned out, would be to launch a line of separate, stand-alone stores, just for Origins.

By 2001, with the learning curve of the Origins experience behind her, Breen had become a major force in the cosmetics industry. She was now senior vice president, general manager, Clinique North America, and her grasp of the market was firm. "Our customer has, collectively, \$2 trillion to spend, and she still shops in a department store. She still buys our products because she knows they're for her. The Lauder brand is the more mature brand. The Baby Boomers trust us."

Personally, Breen was enjoying recognition as never before. She had been one of the first top-level executives to champion innovations like job-sharing, and her emphasis on intense team-building had become an industry role model and mantra.

Taking Risks

Despite her success with Estee Lauder, Breen made an unexpected switch back to department stores in 2002, when she joined the Federated Merchandising Group (Macy's and others) as senior vice president of cosmetics and fragrances. "I took the risk," Breen said. "In our category, 8000 new products were launched last year alone, and most of them end up in department stores. At either end of cosmetics, manufacturing or retail, the business is still all about possibilities and great partnerships. And I include partnerships inside and outside the company. Change in any position is broadening.... I was convinced that I would spend the rest of my career, very happy and still learning, at Federated."


The "rest of" Breen's career turned out to have a shelf life of only three years. In 2005, she was lured back to Estee Lauder. "I was a tough sell this time," she said. But, sold she was, and she re-upped with the cosmetics behemoth as president of Estee Lauder Americas. Her recent promotion, in which she now oversees all of lauder's global development as well, turned out to be a career capstone.


Breen is the first to admit that earlier in her career she was the essence of "all work and no balance." And, that was a problem. "You have to be able to evaluate your work habits and ask yourself why you are working all the time, if you are. That isn't a good thing." For Breen, work no longer spills over into seven days, although her travel schedule would exhaust a secretary of state. "Dubai, Japan, Korea, Belgium, Paris, London, some other Asian nations and Canada; that's about six weeks' worth. At this point, San Francisco seems like a bus ride."

"I had not taken the time to give back to the community, and I made sure I changed that, too," she said. This giving back includes Breen's chairmanship of the Mother's Day Council, which, along with the Father's Day Council, is dedicated to publicizing the months of May and June as a time to honor mothers and fathers. She is also an active board member of the Skin Cancer Foundation and Fashion Group International, among others.

And, as the busy new architect of Lauder's global expansion, Breen has some very definite ideas. "It's no longer enough just to be a 'Western' company," she said. "That might have worked even as recently as five or six years ago. Not now. Local competition, as long as it offers quality products, is pushing our industry harder and harder. The competition tends to be boutique and somewhat localized. We really have to get rid of that one-size-fits-all approach in cosmetics. That's especially true in Asia, where the potential market is so big and so promising."

She added: "But, basics are still basics. That's product quality, targeted messages, identifying and listening to your core customers, and staying tuned to what they want. It's still about protecting your brand equity through strategic decisions and building teams and partnerships."

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